

Voices
from the
GapsNora
DeLoach

“

Mama has a gentleness about her that when added to the aroma of her cooking usually soothes most of my discomforts. However, when there is something heavy on her mind, she has another look, a kind of fierce glow of which I can only describe as an inner determination. When Mama has this glow, her cooking isn't designed to soothe - it's a vehicle to organize and arrange her own thoughts.

— Mama Cracks A Mask of Innocence

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Biography

Nora DeLoach was born in Orlando, Florida, in 1940. DeLoach began writing in 1991, when her short story, “Melissa,” won fifth place in a contest and “A Mama’s Story” was published in *Obsidian II, Black Literature in Review*. She was nominated Georgia Author of the Year in both 2000 and 2001. Her literary inspirations include classic writers such as Agatha Christie, Pearl S. Buck, and Nero Wolfe. Following a decade of literary accomplishments, Nora DeLoach passed away on June 19th, 2001, after a brief battle with leukemia.

Foremost in her life, Nora DeLoach was the mother of three children, and a grandmother of two boys. It is perhaps for this reason that she is best remembered for her “Mama” mystery series. Her books reflect her joyful personality as they are filled with colorful, vibrant descriptions of the relationship between mother and daughter and their ties to a small town community.

Quick Facts

- * 1940-2001
- * African-American mystery novelist
- * Wrote the “Mama” mystery series

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Biography continued

Mama's character is composed of a blend of elements from various mystery novel sleuths such as Sherlock Holmes and Nero Wolfe. However, for DeLoach, the true inspiration for Mama's character evolved from "The Imperial Woman" by Pearl S. Buck. DeLoach's main character, Grace "Candi" Covington (otherwise known as "Mama"), is a woman who has spent her life fulfilling her roles as a mother and wife, later shifting her focus to developing her skills as an amateur sleuth. Mama's use of her sleuthing ability to reach out and make a difference in her community is a hallmark of her character. As quoted in *Mama Stalks The Past*, Mama believes that "if we could get at the truth of a problem, we would have made a contribution to humankind" (33).

As does DeLoach, Mama's character reflects a strong matriarchal identity that drives her to protect her family and her community, especially where her children are concerned. In accordance with her personality, Mama's perspective on life is described in *Mama Saves A Victim* as "the maternal instinct, the feeling that perpetuated life" (134). A defining characteristic of the Mama mystery series is the first person narration of the story as told by Mama's daughter, Simone. DeLoach explains that she choose to tell the series from Simone's perspective because many well-known mysteries, such as the Sherlock Holmes series, are told from a supporting character's point of view. This perspective, says DeLoach, "allowed idiosyncrasies to be told . . . that add charm and personality to their protagonist." She originally focused on the development of her characters, but later in the series she turned to fine-tuning the "puzzle" of the mystery that readers look for. In her words, "while an unusual character will get you a specific audience, you have to give that audience a plot puzzle that satisfies."

In *Mama Solves a Murder*, Mama's first prime-time appearance finds her deeply involved in two separate murders—one in her hometown, Otis, South Carolina, and the other in the fast-paced metropolis, Atlanta, Georgia. Grace Covington, known in her small hometown as "Candi" for her candied sweet-potato complexion, and to her daughter Simone as "Mama," befriends a hard-hitting Atlanta lawyer. Simone's college roommate stands accused of cold-blooded murder, and to clear her name before she gets locked away for good, Mama and Simone pair up to get to the bottom of the mystery.



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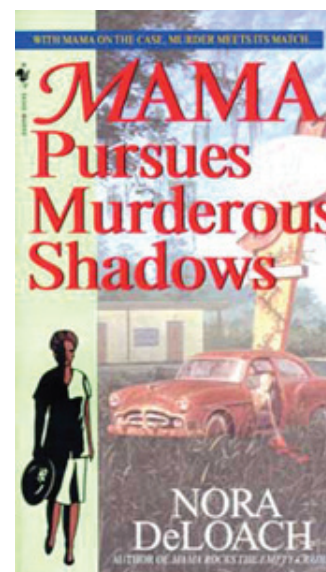
Biography continued

In the next book, *Mama Traps a Killer*, when Simone returns home to Otis for a visit with her parents, something sour is in the air. The horrific murders of a local teenager and an unidentifiable young woman force Mama and Simone into an uneasy alliance -- this time against Mama's husband, James Covington! As the evidence mounts against him, Mama and Simone are compelled to re-evaluate their relationship with James. As the mystery deepens and the Covington family's loyalties are tested to the limits, their last hope is that Mama can trap the killer before it's too late.

Mama Stands Accused finds Simone back in Otis to join Mama in her effort to solve the mysterious death of her sister, Agnes. Since Agnes has a reputation as the town liar and gossip, at first the whole town is under fire. When Agnes' husband, Ben, is arrested for her murder, Mama is forced to find out more of the family's past to search for clues. As one of the last people to see Agnes alive, Mama is accused of Agnes' brutal murder. With still more family members turning up dead, the mother-daughter duo races against time to bring justice back to the community.

The theme of family ties continues in *Mama Stalks The Past*. Following the death of Mama's neighbor, Hannah Nixon, Mama finds out that Hannah has bequeathed the Nixon family's land to her. However when Mama discovers that Hannah has been poisoned, the town's attention is focused on Mama. Everyone wonders why Mama inherited the land in place of Hannah's only son, Nat. To clear her name and solve the mystery behind Hannah's death, Mama sets out to track the murderer.

Her fifth appearance, in *Mama Saves a Victim*, brings us back to Otis, when Simone Covington accidentally hits a mysterious local girl with her car, she can't seem to shake feeling of fear she saw in the young girl's eyes. Simone is constantly disturbed by the haunting smell of the victim - a Lysol-like odor that reminds her of her own dark, buried memories. When Mama and Simone find the unknown girl in an old photograph, they go to work as Mama saves a victim from her own troubled past.





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In *Mama Rocks the Empty Cradle*, when Simone heads back home for a friendly visit, murder and mystery erupt once again in the small town of Otis. At the grocery store, Mama and Simone see a local woman carrying a baby that doesn't belong to her. Mama's sleuthing instincts are further aroused when a young woman is murdered and the baby disappears without a trace. Intrigued, the sleuthing partners hit the trail to uncover the mother-infant mystery in this intriguing thriller.

In her next-to-last book, *Mama Pursues Murderous Shadows*, Mama and Simone happily reunite for the Covingtons' thirty-fifth wedding anniversary. Everyone is looking forward to a huge celebration with no less than a fabulous spread of regular down-home country cooking, but their plans are cut short when local resident Ruby Spikes suddenly turns up dead in her hotel room. The local trio of town gossips soon becomes embroiled in the center of the dark and secret murder mystery. As Mama tries to solve the crime, it seems as though the only way to find out what really happened is to put herself right in the line of fire.

In *Mama Cracks A Mask Of Innocence*, DeLoach's final book in the Mama series, Simone heads back to Otis to volunteer with her mother for a clothing drive. But instead of donating charitable service, Mama and Simone find themselves concentrating on cracking the case of Brenda Long's brutal murder. The young high-school student's body is found in a shallow grave -- but as the detecting duo dig deeper into the mystery, even Brenda's sweet personality becomes suspect. The prime suspect is Brenda's former boyfriend, but when Mama discovers that Brenda had planned to expose a drug ring, suddenly everyone in the small town seems like a suspect.



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Biography continued

Consistently throughout the Mama series, the Covington clan exemplifies strong and faithful familial relationships, ties, and loyalties. They hold together through the rough times and support each other when in distress. Through Simone's eyes, we can see the different family relationships in both the Otis community at large and within their private family relationships. For example, in *Mama Traps a Killer*, the question becomes not only one of how far family loyalty should be carried, but also the types of relationships that fathers should have with their children. Long after his own two sons have grown, Daddy befriends a local boy with no father, and is forced to rethink what 'fatherhood' means. In this book, James says, "When I started taking up time with the boy, I began remembering all the years that I didn't spend with my own boys and I guess it made me sick. So, while I was enjoying helping Danny, I was also yearning for the years I'd missed with my own boys" (162). The absent father in Danny's life, the strict, military upbringing of the Covington boys, and other parent-child relationships are emphasized throughout the series. In this manner, DeLoach highlights the importance of the family and healthy interpersonal relationships.

Additionally, the roles between husband and wife are examined with respect to relationships within their family and community. In *Mama Solves a Murder*, the first book in the Mama series, Simone introduces her boyfriend, Cliff, to her parents. In a heart-to-heart with her daughter, Mama advises, "If what you see is not exactly what you expected to get, accept him anyway and always insist that he accept you. Once you make up your mind that he's the guy for you, buy into him completely -- lock, stock, and barrel" (106-107). DeLoach includes simple maxims throughout each of the Mama books, emphasizing mutual respect, caring, and understanding.

Another consistent theme in the Mama series is the mother-daughter relationship. This is seen in the "dynamic duo" role occupied by Simone and Mama. This relationship is founded on the idea that each character depends on the other in order to get the job done. Their relationship revolves around mutual respect and participation. Simone often praises Mama in *Mama Solves a Murder*; she says to a friend, "My mother is a very special lady - I realize that everybody thinks their Mama is special, but at least I know what makes mine special" (58). "The fact is that my mama is a powerful woman" (56). Simone and Mama are rarely separated when searching for clues or sleuthing. The powerful mother-daughter bond, their ties within in the community, and the development of the other types of interpersonal relationships are several of the strongest themes in DeLoach's series.



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In developing these themes, DeLoach applies a glue that ties them all together -- Mama's cooking. The steady use of Mama's ability to serve up the best tasting food in all of this provides a central theme around which DeLoach is able to more vividly illustrate additional themes prominent in her books. Mama's cooking provides a medium around which family members as well as community members gather to create bonds and help one another. By giving of herself through her knack for creating mouth-watering dishes, Mama fulfills her matriarchal role. Her cooking also serves as a vehicle to build relationships within her community. Often, Mama will invite residents of Otis into her home to share meal (or just a quick snack!), which is more than a simple plate of food. It's a message that expresses Mama's genuine concern for humanity and need to help other in any way, shape or form. Whether she is solving murders or throwing a party, Mama's delectable dishes are always a part of the story!

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